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Camp Tabor

Last June the Community United Methodist Church of Mount Tabor celebrated the bi-centennial of American Methodism by highlighting its own historic beginnings. Mount Tabor was founded as the camp meeting ground of the Newark Annual Conference in 1869, and continues to function under the charter granted by the New Jersey Legislature in that year. Camp meeting has passed, and the community with its thriving church is now a typical suburban town with all the contemporary challenges. But amid the Victorian cottages there stands the old Tabernacle built in 1885, closed now except for an occasional community event. It is a priceless example of "camp meeting" architecture, as well as an important historic site in our New Jersey religious history.

On June 24, 1984 Mount Tabor Methodists opened the Tabernacle on Trinity Circle, and enjoyed a day-long celebration of our Methodist heritage. I was privileged to preach the sermon in which I spoke of Mount Tabor's past. Having served the Mount Tabor Church from 1945-1960 during a period of building and growth, the whole event had much meaning for me. In the research for that sermon I discovered some rich resources which revealed the character and physical environment of Camp Tabor as well as some of the concerns of the camp meeting movement. The Annual Conference Archives and History Society thought it would be of Conference interest to share some of this material. Therefore, I offer excerpts from the sermon which relate to camp meeting, and Camp Tabor in particular.

Robert Drew Simpson, Ph.D.

"A Cloud of Witnesses" Hebrews 11:39-12:2

Just to be in this historic building today, which next year will be 100 years old, suggests the phrase which Hebrews used, "A Cloud of Witnesses." The thought of our forbearers singing the praises of God in this place across the decades is inspiring in itself.

Think of it. When Mt. Tabor began as a camp meeting in 1869, August 23, our denomination, the Methodist Episcopal Church, was not yet 85 years old. In other words, there were those at that first camp meeting who were living when our church was founded in 1784.

It is important that we honor the unique contribution camp meeting has made as a religious form in our Methodist experience. For those who may not know, camp meeting is uniquely American. It was born of the frontier spirit before 1800 among the Cumberland Presbyterians. Sweeping through Methodist circles, as many as 25,000 participated at a single camp meeting.

Camp meeting was of major importance in the south and on the western frontier and soon came east among Methodists in New York, Pennsylvania, Del-

aware, Maryland, and, of course, in New Jersey. Camp meeting in western New Jersey became almost a mania. One district superintendent was criticized in the early days because he went into the woods in June and never came out until October.

Camp meeting multiplied. It was to be found as an exercise and experience in evangelism in Rahway, Union Village, Nutley, Whippany, Glenwood--to name a few--all before 1836. The earliest camp meeting ground in the bounds of our Conference, of which I can find record, was in Parsippany on the Benjamin Munn farm in 1806.

But Mt. Tabor Camp Meeting, along with others of that period, was really of a different cut. Growing out of the Great Prayer Revival of 1857 and the centennial of American Methodism, Mt. Tabor represented a new and more structured form of camp meeting, destined to become institutionalized. Beginning at Speedwell Lake near Morristown and Morris Plains in August 1866, Mt. Tabor by 1869 was opened for "holy Business" on this hill and given the Biblical name, Mount Tabor.

Actually by hindsight we can recognize that a religious resort community was in the making, though probably few sensed what was happening at the moment. Methodists in those days were strongly evangelical and almost exclusively individualistic in their understanding of the faith. This gave rise to the fervent and sometimes hell-fire, emotional preaching, dedicated to saving the souls, so characteristic of camp meeting.

But, it is fascinating to research what it was like here in Camp Tabor, over 100 years ago. Recently I discovered in the Methodist Archives Center at Drew University, a rare book entitled: "Camp Tabor," written by Mary Hawkins Norris in 1874. She tells in story fashion her first summer in Camp Tabor in 1872. It is priceless in it's original material. Relax in time now and picture what this place was like according to her description.

Coming out by train from New York City with her mother, they arrived at Tabor. Her words, "The train paused before an unpainted station erected for the Camp Taborites. The long covered platform was full of eager, smiling faces turned towards the car windows. A bell recalling somewhat unpleasantly the shrill ring of those on the ferrys was heard in the woods, which here and there sparkled with the early lighted gas. The well-made road from the station to Camp Tabor was gay with scarlet and blue jackets and other bright garments."

"Settling in our tent, the curtains were tied back, the soil elevated two feet from the ground, was covered with plaid matting. The iron bedstead, with its white coverlet and huge pillow, gleamed invitingly in the twilight. The bureau, the washstand, and the table were arranged along the side of the tent. The center was occupied by two or three camp chairs and a low rocker. A faint breeze shook the chestnut perfume down from the trees in the thick grove."

"The Tabernacle," Mary goes on, "was a wooden building whose rear standing on what might be called the business avenue of Tabor, was not very inviting." (The first building on this site was moved across the street to become the superintendent's home.)

"The front was relieved by a broad platform, over which projected a Gothic roof. Above and behind the bishop's chair which occupied the center of the platform, was fastened in rustic letters, 'Come to Jesus.' Over a semi-circular pulpit extending from the middle of the stage, was a striped blue and white canvas awning.

A large space fronting the tabernacle (Trinity Park) sloped gently back to where it was situated, the tents and cottages facing on Morris Avenue. On the east and west of the first or inner circle were located the prayer meeting tents and then the private tents and cottages. More than 300 tents and cottages were erected the first five years."

And Mary remembers all the good fun children had in playing in the comparative freedom this place provided over the year. Many of you, I am sure, remember from your childhood, the woods, the lake, the picnics and the games.

Mary even found time to discuss with her Aunt Winifred, the merits of camp meeting itself. "Do you object to the shouting and the screaming, Auntie?" And Winifred answers, "I've not the slightest objection to a shout, if it is a spiritual one and not purely an animal one. Showing the whites of my eyes, throwing up my hands and screaming myself hoarse--is that religion? If you screamed, twitched, fainted, I should fear you in spiritual dyspepsia. What I dearly love about camp meeting is that many learn to play and sing and think of God at other than stated times. People can find time in August to leave their farms and come to camp meeting. I think it is a grand thing that Methodists have these yearly gatherings."

And so camp meeting ended. But not without celebration, for at the end the tabernacle bell rang and the soldiers of the Lord gathered to sing the great hymns of the faith. Then forming a line, young and old marched around this circle. Then "they left Camp Tabor resolved to work more earnestly for their Master and enjoy daily the mercies of His redeeming grace."

All of that was more than 100 years ago and it continued across the years. The lives of thousands were renewed and refreshed. They stand as Hebrew says: "A great crowd of witnesses" surrounding us as their spiritual descendants. The letter to the Hebrews has keen contemporary meaning. For we have the responsibility in the faith to those who have given so much for us in church and society. Though times and manners change, the need to be whole people, more committed to our Savior, is as real now as it has always been. The author of Hebrews continues to urge us "to lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with patience the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

One of the celebrated bishops of our church in camp meeting days and a regular preacher at Camp Tabor, was the well-known Bishop Matthew Simpson. I recently found a sermon he preached in camp meeting over 100 years ago. Therefore let an authentic camp meeting preacher have the last word in this celebration.

The bishop said, "When you go to your homes, you want to go with trembling and fears; only keep humble and look to Jesus for help. Go home believing, take Jesus with you. Go into no company where you cannot take Jesus with you; do nothing in which you cannot ask his assistance; say nothing that Jesus cannot approve, but give yourself to the Lord."

That message is never out of date, whether it be in the day of horse and buggy, or this time of high technology. There is only one response Jesus asks--give yourself wholly to the Lord.

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